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"Men Were Deceivers Ever"

Deceptive Appearances in Much Ado About Nothing

Shelby Shipley

Shakespeare's comedic play *Much Ado About Nothing* is made up of two main love plots: Benedick and Beatrice, and Claudio and Hero. The two plots have several things in common, including the role deception plays in bringing the couples together. There are several instances of deception throughout the play, and these deceptions are ultimately the foundation for both of these relationships. Benedick and Beatrice are deceived through Don Pedro's plan to have the two of them fall in love; Claudio is first deceived by Don John at the masque and again by Don John and Borachio's plan to thwart Claudio and Hero's approaching wedding. These deceptions not only bring together one pair and drive apart the other, but through the characters' reactions to the deceit, their true natures are revealed to the audience. As Benedick, Beatrice, and Claudio are all deceived, the audience becomes aware of the masks each of them wears, and by noting their reaction to the false information, the audience's perception and understanding of the characters are challenged.

As spectators of the play, the audience is present and acts as an eavesdropper during the planning of each deception, which puts them in a position of power. In Act 2 Scene 1, the audience is present as Don Pedro

proposes his plan to bring Beatrice and Benedick together to Claudio, Leonato, and Hero. They are also present during the following scene to hear Don John and Borachio's plan to tear apart Hero and Claudio. The audience feels as though they are "in the know" because they know who the deceiver is and who is being deceived. In the article "Spectatorship in/ of *Much Ado About Nothing*," Nova Myhill argues that the audience actually becomes an eavesdropper just as Benedick, Beatrice, and Claudio do. She says, "The theater audience's assumption of its own privileged position as eavesdropper is undercut by the frequency with which the play's characters are deceived by their assumptions that eavesdropping offers unproblematic access to truth" (Myhill 292). However, not only is this position of privilege challenged by having the audience become eavesdroppers and then by challenging the assumption of eavesdropping being a way to access truth, but also because the assumptions and perceived knowledge the audience has about the characters is challenged.

The audience's assumptions begin to be challenged by the first major deception of the play: Don Pedro's plan to make Benedick and Beatrice fall in love with each other. For this deception to work, there must be a secondary deception. As Benedick and Beatrice are being deceived by their friends, this secondary deception is revealed, and the audience gains a more complete picture of each character. Richard Henze's article "Deception in *Much Ado About Nothing*" helps to identify what Don Pedro's deceit reveals about Benedick and Beatrice. Henze says, "One major, proper deception in *Much Ado*, that of Benedick and Beatrice by Don Pedro and his friends, is pleasantly designed to end another deception, the pretense of Benedick and Beatrice that each is the last person the other would marry" (Henze 188). Not only is this deception designed to serve these two purposes, but it also must end the deception that neither of them wishes to ever be married.

There are many instances where Beatrice appears to have a disdain for marriage and claims to believe that she will never enter into such a union. She says, "I had rather hear a dog bark at a crow, than a man / swear he loves me," implies there is no man for her by saying "He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath / no beard is less than a man; and is that is more than / a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I / am not for him," and claims that she will not marry until "God make men of some metal other than earth" (Shakespeare 1.1.125–126, 2.1.31–34, 2.1.52). These statements, however, are revealed to be a form of self-deception. This

particular deceptive mask begins to slip during the masquing scene. After aiding Don Pedro in bringing together Claudio and Hero, Beatrice says, “thus goes everyone / to the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a / corner and cry ‘Hey ho for a husband’” (Shakespeare 2.1.292–294). Henze claims that in saying this, Beatrice reveals that she too wishes to find a husband and be married; however, “Beatrice, like Petruchio’s Kate, is willing enough to be caught, but self-protective enough to avoid the shame of rejection” (Henze 189).

Not only are Beatrice’s feelings toward marriage challenged in this scene, but so are her feelings toward Benedick. Don Pedro tells her that she “[has] lost the heart of Signor Benedick,” to which she responds, “Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I / gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one” (Shakespeare 2.1.255–558). In the third series Arden Edition of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the footnote for these lines suggests this could be referring to a past romantic disappointment between Benedick and Beatrice. Beatrice’s attempt to deceive the audience into believing that Benedick is the last person she could ever fall in love with is upended because Beatrice giving Benedick a “double heart” suggests that not only could Beatrice fall in love with Benedick, but that she already has once before. This is further supported by her reaction upon learning of Benedick’s feelings toward her. After Hero and Ursula leave, Beatrice says, “Benedick, love on, I will requite thee, / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand / If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee” (Shakespeare 3.1.111–113). Beatrice immediately chooses to return Benedick’s feelings because she already loves him, and so the deceptive mask that she could never find a man suited for her is discarded.

Like Beatrice, Benedick also appears to disdain marriage, and believes that he will love none. He says, “I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for / truly I love none” and claims, “I will not be sworn but love may transform me to an oyster, but / I’ll take my oath on it, till he have made an oyster of me / he shall never make me such a fool” (Shakespeare 1.1.120–121, 2.3.23–25). Benedick claims that he loves none, and that no woman could tempt him into love because no one could live up to his standards. He claims that he would rather look pale “with anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my / lord, not with love” (Shakespeare 1.1.233–234). This suggests that Benedick is attempting to deceive the audience, those around him, and perhaps even himself into believing he will die a bachelor. Like Beatrice, however, Benedick’s attempt at deception is upended after he overhears Don Pedro,

Leonato, and Claudio talking about Beatrice's supposed feelings for him. After learning of her love, he says, "They say the lady is fair / - 'tis a truth, I can bear them witness. And virtuous - / 'tis so, I cannot reprove it. And wise, but for loving me . . . I will be horribly in love with her" (Shakespeare 2.3.222–224, 226). Benedick quickly finds that Beatrice can, in fact, live up to his standards and tempt him into love. This mask of self-deception and the belief that he would never marry fall away, and the audience sees Benedick is ready to commit to love and marriage.

The play then takes steps to upend and challenge the audience's expectations for these two characters beyond their feelings about marriage. Through Beatrice and Benedick's reactions to Hero's public shaming, further truth about their characters is uncovered. In the article "Gender Wars: Emotion in *Much Ado About Nothing*," Thomas J. Sheff explains the specific literary roles Benedick and Beatrice are meant to fit. Sheff says, "Benedick's role conforms to that of the misogynist, the woman-hater, lady-killer; Beatrice occupies the complementary female role, the shrew who is 'curst' with ill-temper and hatred of men" (154). In the first few acts of the play, we see the two of them play the parts of these assigned roles, and as a result, they conform to the audience's expectations of how the shrew and misogynist characters are meant to behave. In the introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition to *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claire McEachern explains how the play challenges these assumptions. She says, "Benedick and Beatrice are not merely stereotypes; indeed, the fun of this play is the way in which they shake off these conventions of misogynist and shrew and reveal them in the process as inadequate descriptions of human conduct" (McEachern 36). These roles act as another form of deception, but this time it's the audience, rather than the characters, that is being deceived.

Beatrice's poor attitude toward men and her disdain for marriage, as well as Benedick's distrust of women from the opening acts of the play set us up to believe that they do nothing more than play the shrew and misogynist roles they have been assigned. However, McEachern suggests that Shakespeare uses these classical roles of shrew and misogynist as a "demonstration of the play's concern with the frequent distance between who people imagine themselves to be and who they actually are," rather than with confirmed and final states of the characters (McEachern 36). Shakespeare draws attention to this distance between our perception of people and who they truly are, as McEachern says, by using the classical roles of shrew and misogynist as

masks that hide their true characters. Though Beatrice appears to be a shrew through her perceived pride and continual renunciations of marriage, she is quick to admit they are worth nothing upon hearing Hero and Ursula point out and exaggerate these faults. She says, "Contempt, farewell; and maiden pride, adieu; / no glory lives behind the back of such" (Shakespeare 3.1.109–110). Her shrewishness is further shown to be a deception when Claudio accuses Hero. Beatrice's tears for her cousin reveal to the audience that Beatrice is not ill-tempered and unfeeling, but kind, gentle and wanting the best for her cousin. The immediacy of Beatrice's willingness to love Benedick and her tender feelings for Hero suggest that Beatrice the Shrew is nothing more than a mask and a deception.

Just as with Beatrice, in the earlier acts of the play, the audience sees Benedick fall easily into his designated role of misogynist; however, his actions in the later acts of the play suggest that this role is actually a mask. In Act 1, he admits to being a slanderer of women, saying, "Would you have / me speak after my custom, as being a professional tyrant of their sex?" (Shakespeare 1.159–160). He also claims that he will trust no woman: "All women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the / wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust / none. And the fine is—for the which I may go the finer / —I will live a bachelor" (Shakespeare 1.1.127–130). These examples help establish Benedick as the misogynist and feed into this audience's expectations of him and the designated role. However, like Beatrice's role as the shrew, this is a mask that falls away after Hero is accused and shamed by Count Claudio. Though Benedick has claimed to be the slanderer of women, he is not the one that ends up being the slanderer of the play. He claims to never trust women, but then he chooses to trust Beatrice and Hero when they insist that Hero is innocent and wrongly accused. Despite Don Pedro, Claudio, and Don John's "evidence" of Hero's unvirtuous behavior, and that all he has is the word of two women, Benedick tells Beatrice, "Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged" (Shakespeare 4.1.259). When Beatrice tells Benedick to kill Claudio, he is reluctant at first to challenge his friend, but when Beatrice reaffirms her belief in Hero's innocence, he declares, "Enough, I am engaged. I will challenge him" (Shakespeare 4.1.328). Thus, Benedick the Misogynist is revealed to be a deception as he shows that he can and does trust and listen to women.

The audience's assumptions about Beatrice and Benedick as a shrew and a misogynist are challenged by their relationships with other characters

and their later assumed marriage. By showing that Benedick is not truly mistrustful of women and Beatrice is not ill-tempered and against marriage, Shakespeare challenges the generic roles and the audience's expectations. First, Benedick and Beatrice's masks fall away, and the audience becomes aware of how they were being deceived by looking at the two lovers in only the roles they had been assigned. As a result, the audience has their assumptions about how each character fits into their role challenged.

The second big deception in *Much Ado About Nothing* comes to light when Don John's plan to convince Claudio that his love, Hero, is unvirtuous and therefore unworthy to be his bride. Just as we see self-deception fall away in Don Pedro's deception of Benedick and Beatrice, we can see the same thing happen to Claudio. As deception drives Claudio and Hero apart, hidden parts of Claudio are revealed to the audience. The deception framing Hero, however, is preceded by another deception that takes place in the masquing scene, which is also essential to understanding Claudio and the mask he wears. When a messenger at the very beginning of the play first tells Leonato that Don Pedro arrives with Benedick and Claudio, it is reported that Claudio "hath borne himself / beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a / lamb the feats of a lion" (Shakespeare 1.1.13–15). From his first introduction, the audience is told that Claudio is honorable. We are similarly told of Claudio's honor as Beatrice despairs at his keeping company with Benedick, she says, "O Lord [Benedick] will hang upon [Claudio] like a disease! / He is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker / turns presently mad. God help the noble Claudio! If he have caught the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere 'a be cured" (Shakespeare 1.1.81–84). Beatrice believes that Claudio is noble, good, and that if he continues keeping the company of Benedick, he will be corrupted. The characters in the play, as well as the audience, are led to believe that Claudio is good and honorable.

However, this mask of nobility quickly is challenged and begins to slip when Claudio is deceived by Don John at the masque. Don John falsely tells Claudio that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself rather than for Claudio. Upon hearing this news, Claudio says, "Tis certain so; the prince woos for himself. / Friendship is constant in all other things / Save in the office and affairs of love" (Shakespeare 2.1.159–161). Claudio's willingness to believe Don John, despite Don John's lack of evidence, suggests that Claudio is suspicious and insecure. His fear of being deceived by those he loves allows him to be more easily deceived by Don John, who wishes to do him harm.

Similarly, in the same scene, we begin to see that it is not Benedick who mistrusts women, but rather Claudio, who we were led to believe is good, loving, and noble. Claudio goes on to say, “Let every eye negotiate for itself, / And trust no agent; for Beauty is a witch / against whose charms faith melteth into blood” (Shakespeare 2.1.162–165). Claudio would rather blame Hero’s beauty and believe it was her that tempted Don Pedro than place blame on Don Pedro, who would have been the true deceiver if he had truly been wooing Hero for himself rather than for Claudio. With the scene at the masque, we begin to see that Claudio’s faithfulness and nobility may perhaps be a deception. This scene at the masque prepares the audience for his reaction to Don John’s later deception.

Just as with Benedick and Beatrice, in order for Don John and Borachio’s scheme to work there must be a secondary deception already at work. Richard Henze further elaborates, saying, “For Don Pedro’s scheme to work; Claudio’s faithfulness has to be deceptive for Don John’s plan to succeed, a plan which is, appropriately, not even Don John’s, but Borachio’s” (Henze 193). Claudio’s mask of nobility and faithfulness is fully removed, and his suspicious, insecure nature is revealed as he listens to Don John’s false accusation of Hero. Claudio’s suspicious nature is revealed first in his choice to believe Don John at all. Claudio has been deceived by Don Pedro’s bastard half-brother once already. At this point in the play, Don John is a proven liar, while Hero has not given Claudio any reason to doubt her and her commitment to him. Yet, despite this, Claudio chooses to believe Don John anyway. Just as in the earlier masque scene, Claudio’s suspicion of Hero is immediate, and he is quick to blame her in both instances. Don John has no evidence of Hero’s unfaithfulness, and once again, Claudio knows that Don John has deceived him before. This further reveals to the audience that Claudio is not only suspicious and insecure, but he is also distrustful of women. This distrust and suspicion makes him an easy target for Don John. Claudio’s mask of faithfulness and nobility begins to fall as his distrustful and suspicious nature is revealed.

Claudio’s perceived nobility is also undercut when he chooses Hero’s punishment before he has seen her crime. He says, “If I see anything tonight why I should not / marry her, tomorrow in the congregation where I / should wed, there will I shame her” (Shakespeare 3.3.111–113). Claudio has no evidence of any wrongdoing on Hero’s part, save Don John’s word. Despite this, Claudio has already picked a punishment for her. In his article “*Much*

Ado About Nothing' and the Spectator" William Bubula explains that his choice of public shaming may seem overly cruel for more contemporary audiences; he says, "Usually, [Claudio] is defended by reference to Renaissance attitudes and tastes. His rejection of Hero would not have seemed as cruel as it seems to us. . . . Yet cruelty is cruelty, especially when the audience knows Hero is innocent" (Bubula 13). He argues that despite the punishment of public shaming being normal according to Renaissance attitudes, the audience still sees this act as overly cruel because of their knowledge of Hero's innocence. This cruel act, paired with the revelation of Claudio's suspicious nature and clear distrust of women, changes how the audience perceives Claudio, and we are left to wonder if he truly is as noble as he is made out to be at the beginning of the play. Similarly, just as our expectation of Benedick is changed by his choice to trust Beatrice and Hero, our expectations of Claudio are changed by his choice to mistrust and slander Hero. As these two men subvert expectations, the audience is left to wonder who is truly the misogynist of the play.

Claudio's reputation of being faithful and noble ends up lost because his fear of being deceived causes him to act opposite of what the audience expects of him. A running joke throughout *Much Ado About Nothing* is that of the cuckold. A cuckold is a man whose wife has cheated on him, and Claire McEachern further explains that a cuckold is "the idea that a deceived husband would grow horns which would reveal him to his community as a dupe of his wife and her lover. . . . The horns are thus associated with visibility; they much the concupiscent conspicuous" (McEachern 46, 48). The fear of cuckoldry can then be connected to the fear of visibility, and, more specifically, the shame with the visibility that one has been deceived. Claudio's biggest fear is being seen as someone who has been deceived and becoming a so-called "cuckold." This fear causes him to behave rashly and trust people that perhaps he should not. When he believes he has the upper hand and knows of Hero's unfaithfulness, he shames her publicly to keep his own honor safe. The audience, however, knows the truth, and so instead we watch as his mask of honor falls and his insecurity and suspicious nature are revealed. His attempts to keep himself safe from deception backfire, and he ends up accusing an innocent. Claudio's fault comes from a fear of being deceived and the visibility that often comes with deception. In Claudio's attempts to protect himself, he actually becomes more susceptible to deception, and as those deceptions play out, Claudio's mask of nobility

falls away and only his true nature of being a fearful and distrustful person remains.

On the surface of *Much Ado About Nothing*, there appears to be two main deception plots, that of Benedick and Beatrice and that of Claudio; however, upon further examination of the role of the audience and the characters in the play, more deception is revealed than what is seen in just those two plots. Deception is the main catalyst for the story arc of the play, and also acts as the catalyst for character growth and revelation. Throughout the play, we see the characters are deceiving themselves as well as the audience by the masks they wear and the roles they are expected to play. The audience expects them to be one thing, but Shakespeare challenges these ideas and generic roles. *Much Ado About Nothing* (or rather, *Much Ado About Noting*, as it would have originally pronounced) challenges the position of power that an audience feel they have in the play by keeping them deceived like the characters within the play. They become eavesdroppers, members of the deceived who must learn to note and to make observations—as though they themselves are a character in the play.

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